

Developing new GCSEs, AS and A levels for first teaching in 2017 – part 3

Regulatory impact assessment



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1. Introduction

GCSEs, AS and A levels are being reformed. We are introducing regulatory requirements to achieve comparability for similar qualifications in the assessment arrangements across the exam boards. We regulate how these arrangements are implemented to secure standards over time.

This regulatory impact assessment considers the impact of the new assessment arrangements compared with the pre-reform assessment arrangements for the following qualifications:

- GCSE – physical education (short course) and sociology¹
- AS and A level – geology, politics and statistics.²

We previously set out our principles for tiering and assessment arrangements for all general qualifications. We considered whether it is appropriate to implement these changes and assessed the impacts relative to continuing with the existing approach.

¹ We originally consulted on proposals for assessment arrangements in GCSE sociology in July 2015. We are considering the impacts and making decisions on assessment arrangements now, as DfE has finalised the subject content

² We originally consulted on proposals for assessment arrangements in AS and A level statistics in September 2015. We are considering the impacts and making decisions on assessment arrangements now, as DfE has finalised the subject content

2. Changes to the assessment arrangements

Non-exam assessment

We reviewed the percentage of non-exam assessment in each qualification in line with our following principles:

- Non-exam assessment should only be used when it is not valid to assess by exam.
- In most circumstances, the percentage of marks attributed through non-exam assessment should be the same across all exam boards.

The table below sets out the changes we proposed.

Subject	GCSE		A level		AS	
	Legacy weighting of non-exam assessment	Proposed weighting of non-exam assessment	Legacy weighting of non-exam assessment	Proposed weighting of non-exam assessment	Legacy weighting of non-exam assessment	Proposed weighting of non-exam assessment
Sociology	0%	0%				
PE short course	60%	40%				
Geology			20-30%	0% (with separate reporting of practical skills)	20-30%	0%
Politics			0%	0%	0%	0%
Statistics			0-41/6%	0%	0-81/3%	0%

Table 1. Comparison of current and proposed weightings of non-exam assessment. Where a range is stated these figures show the maximum weighting of a range allowed under our regulations. One or more boards currently use a lower weighting in their qualification.

Tiering

We set out our principle that tiering should only be used when it is not possible to adequately assess all students using the same exam questions. For qualifications in this impact assessment, this represents no change.

Assessment objectives

We revised assessment objectives for each subject. The changes are made on a subject-specific basis, and largely represent realigning assessment objectives with the changes made to the specification's content by the Department for Education (DfE).

Additionally, we propose to move from where an assessment objective could make up a wide range of the marks for a subject, to where it must make up the percentage set out by us or, for some AS and A levels, be within a narrow and prescribed range. Historically, this meant exam boards could have a very different weighting between assessment objectives for the same qualification. The new system will reduce the differences between specifications for the same subject.

3. Assessing costs and benefits of the changes to assessment arrangements

Non-exam assessment

We are reducing the weighting of non-exam assessment in the following qualifications:

- GCSE physical education (short course)
- AS and A level geology
- AS and A level statistics

In geology and statistics, we propose changes to the non-exam assessment arrangements to standardise the percentage of marks for exam and non-exam assessment across all exam boards' qualifications. For some exam boards, this will mean a change in the weighting of non-exam assessment in their qualifications. In geology there will be a new separate assessment of practical skills at A level and the result of this will be reported alongside the final grade.

In total, these changes will affect about 15,000 entries annually³.

While we set out the reductions in weightings in non-exam assessment, we do not prescribe what this means for the future number or size of non-exam assessments (where they continue to exist), although we required the form the assessment of practical skills must take in geology, or the length (or number) of exam papers. For GCSE physical education (short course), where the reduction in non-exam assessment is small, it is possible that exam boards will continue to set a similar number of tasks, and their workload and costs remain the same. Where geology A level qualifications as practicals continue to be moderated by exam boards, there are no obvious cost increases or savings to exam boards from removing the assessment of practical skills from the grade and reporting the assessment result separately. There may be, however, some costs as exam boards may need to change their systems to incorporate the extra information.

Exam boards will set the length of exam papers based on their assessment strategies. It is possible that, for some subjects, increasing the proportion of exam-

³ Data from JCQ summer 2014, England only. We have used this dataset to remain consistent with previous impact assessments on these reforms. 2015 data is now available and shows similar numbers of entries in these subjects.

based marks will mean increasing exam time. This would have cost implications for the exam boards in preparing longer or additional papers, and the additional costs of marking them.

It is difficult to predict the net impact of a reduced percentage of non-exam assessment on exam boards without being sure of the impact on overall length and mix of assessment. It seems likely when exam boards set their assessment strategies, they will consider manageability and costs alongside standards to deliver valid assessments.

For schools, a reduction in the number or size of non-exam assessments should reduce the time spent by teachers preparing students for the assessments and marking them. It is possible teachers would use this time to undertake other tasks, including preparing students for exams. In geology A level as practical skills will still be assessed, our assessment at this time is there will be no extra costs or savings for schools.

The principal driver and main benefit of reducing the percentage of non-exam assessment is to improve the validity of the qualifications by ensuring the nature of the assessment is appropriate to the skills, knowledge and understanding being assessed.

Making assessment more similar across exam boards

We moved from exam boards, in many cases, choosing the weighting of assessment objectives and non-exam assessment from a range, to the expectation that each specification would have the same weighting. This would mean the assessment arrangements are more similar across exam boards, so wider users of qualifications can be confident the same qualification is of a comparable standard, regardless of exam board or specification.

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Spring Place
Coventry Business Park
Herald Avenue
Coventry CV5 6UB

2nd Floor
Glendinning House
6 Murray Street
Belfast BT1 6DN

Telephone 0300 303 3344
Textphone 0300 303 3345
Helpline 0300 303 3346